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Montana state trails plan and programmatic environmental impact statement

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ana Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks

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November 4, 1994

Dear Montana Trail Enthusiast:

Montana recently launched a process to develop a comprehensive, statewide trails plan. The Plan will include an inventory of Montana trails, assess attitudes about trails and trail use, and make recommendations about Montana's future trail system. In conjunction with the Plan, a programmatic environmental impact statement (PEIS) will be done on state-administered trail grant programs.

The Plan is intended to be the first "big-picture" look at the organization and management of Montana's trails. In order for the Plan to be a success, trail users and other people interested in the trail program need to express their views through the planning process. An initial round of public scoping meetings has been scheduled for late November and early December to help gather input on important trail-related issues. More details about the meetings, the PEIS, the Plan, and the planning process are included in the attached scoping document.

A major goal of the Trails Plan is to enhance the understanding trail managers and users have of the state's trail network in order to make wise long-range decisions. Trail managers need to know who the trail users are, what they want, where they go, and when they like to use trails. They also need to know how trail programs affect various natural and cultural resources, as well as people who do not use trails. This information will help managing authorities provide better service, reduce adverse impacts, and place scarce trail dollars where they are needed the most.

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) is taking the lead staff role in developing the Plan, but many other agencies and trail user groups are directly involved in the process. The more input received from people interested in trails, the better the Plan is likely to be. If you have comments or questions about the Montana State Trails Plan effort, please contact Jeff Erickson (444-3818) or Bob Walker (444-4585) in the FWP Parks Division. I hope you will be able to participate in the trails planning process.

Sincerely,

Pat Graham

Patrick J. Graham
Director

Attachment

Montana State Trails Plan and Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement (PEIS)

SCOPING DOCUMENT

Prepared by:
Parks Division
Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks

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MONTANA
STATE PARKS

NOVEMBER 1994

MONTANA STATE TRAILS PLAN
AND
PROGRAMMATIC ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT (PEIS) SCOPING DOCUMENT

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INTRODUCTION

The main goal of this document is to involve the public in helping identify the most important trails-related issues in Montana (see page 7 for examples of trail issues). Montana offers many excellent opportunities for trail users, but managing agencies need public input in order to improve the state's trail system. More than 90 percent of the trail miles in the state are managed by the U.S. Forest Service, but other agencies play important roles as trail providers in Montana as well (see table 1).

TABLE 1. NUMBER OF TRAILS AND MILES OF TRAILS BY AGENCY

Agency	Number of Trails	%	Miles of Trails	%
BLM	9	<1	167	1
Commercial Entities	2	<1	24	<1
DFWP[1]	15	<1	28	<1
Indian Reservations	5	<1	6	<1
National Park Service	148	6	826	6
Park & Rec. Depts.	28	1	60	<1
USFWS[2]	6	<1	5	<1
U.S. Forest Service	2,075	90	13,496	92
University of Montana	6	<1	21	<1
Total[3]	2,294	100	14,633	100

Please Note: BLM is the U.S. Bureau of Land Management; DFWP is the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks, and; USFWS is the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Percent totals may not add to 100 due to rounding.

This planning process represents a first attempt to step back and look at the Montana trail system from an inter-agency, state-wide perspective in order to assess potential ways to improve the network. In conjunction with the Trails Plan, a programmatic environmental impact statement (PEIS) will be completed. In general, the Plan is intended to include state-wide policy and management recommendations, while the PEIS will be more of a technical document assessing the impacts of state-administered trail grant programs. Both the Plan and the PEIS will utilize the same public participation process, and both documents will meet applicable provisions from the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA).

The PEIS will address the trails grant program as a whole, and is not intended to be an environmental analysis for individual trail projects. One grant program the PEIS will address is the Recreational Trails Trust Fund, a federal funding source administered on a state-wide level by FWP. In addition, the PEIS will address the off-highway vehicle (OHV) grant program, funded through state fuel tax and decal receipts. Because the state snowmobile grant program was covered in an earlier PEIS, it will probably not be addressed in great detail in the Trails Plan/PEIS.

An important goal of the Trails Plan is to improve trail-related communication in Montana. Enhanced communication among trail managing agencies will help them meet public trail needs more effectively. Improved communication among trail user groups will make them a more effective force in working for an improved trail system. More contact between user groups and managing agencies will result in the latter receiving more and better information about trail conditions, needs, and conflicts, while users will learn more about the challenges facing trail managers.

The Montana State Trails Plan is not intended to usurp the planning processes used by the various federal, state, and local agencies which manage the state's trails. Rather, the Plan is meant to provide trail managers with information about the trail system and the people who use them, and to produce general, state-wide recommendations on trail issues and needs.

For the purposes of this scoping document, "trail" will be defined as a path, route, right-of-way, or other linear corridor used by the public for recreation and/or transportation activities, including (but not necessarily limited to) the following: walking/hiking; backpacking; jogging; off-road bicycling; horseback riding; rollerskating; ATV riding; off-road motorcycling; snowmobiling; and cross-country skiing. It might be important to address other types of uses in the Plan as well: Off-road 4 X 4 driving, for example, is a recreational activity often associated with trails, even though it is not allowed on designated National Forest Service trails. Similarly, bicyclists frequently use both roads and trails on the same trip, for both recreation and transportation: Where is the line between road and trail use, recreation and transportation? Because of ambiguities in what constitutes a trail and a trail use, the definitions have deliberately been left open-ended at this early stage in the process, and may be adjusted later based on public input received from the scoping process.

The Montana Trails Plan is intended to include both summer and winter activities, as well as motorized and non-motorized uses. The Plan will address both single and multi-use trails, and the issues pertaining to them. As used here, the definition will not be limited by trail length or surface type. The focus will be primarily on trails located on public land, and managed by a unit of local, state, or federal government. The Montana Trails Plan will not address issues pertaining to water-based trails or routes.

OVERVIEW OF TRAIL PLANNING PROCESS

The need for a state-wide trails planning effort was initially identified in the 1993 State Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP) Plan, which listed completion of the Trails Plan as one of the key goals for the 1998 SCORP. In order to assist with the plan development, a Trails Plan Advisory Committee was established in the spring of 1994. The Trails Plan Advisory Committee is intended to be a technical group composed mainly of agency representatives. Representatives from the following groups and perspectives were invited to participate:

* U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM)
* U.S. Forest Service (USFS)
* National Park Service (NPS)
* Montana Recreation and Parks Association (MRPA)
* Montana Department of Transportation (MDOT)
* Montana State Trails Advisory Committee (Non-motorized representative)
* Montana State Trails Advisory Committee (Motorized representative)
* Montana League of Cities and Towns
* Montana Association of Counties
* Institute for Tourism and Recreation Research, The University of Montana
* Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP)
* Travel Montana, Montana Department of Commerce
* Disabled Access Issues
* Montana Office of Indian Affairs
* Montana Historical Society (MHS)

Two members of the Plan Committee listed above were appointed by the existing State Trails Advisory Committee (STAC), one each to represent motorized and non-motorized users. The STAC is a state-wide committee composed of representatives from various trail user groups which makes recommendations on trails funding and other trail-related issues. In addition to having representation on the Plan Committee, the STAC members will be regularly updated on progress, and play a significant role in developing and reviewing the Plan. User groups represented on the STAC include the following:

* Snowmobiling
* Hiking
* Dirtbiking
* Horseback Riding
* ATV Riding
* Bicycling
* 4 X 4 Driving
* Cross-country Skiing

Two substantial research projects for the Plan were recently completed by the Institute for Tourism and Recreation Research at The University of Montana in Missoula. Beginning in late 1993, the Institute surveyed trail users about their trail use during the previous six months (capturing summer use). The second phase of the survey was initiated during April, 1994, and was designed to capture data on winter trail use. The surveys gathered a variety of information on trail users, including details about trail preferences, use patterns, user conflicts, and other data.

The other major trails study conducted by the Institute was a comprehensive inventory of all trails in Montana. Trail managers were contacted to supply trail data such as location, length, elevation range, prohibited uses, and other information. The data was entered into a data base

which will be available to agencies and the public as an information resource on trails. Major themes which emerged from the trails inventory and user survey will be discussed in the Plan.

Key dates and achievements in the Trails Plan development process are as follows:

* **October, 1993:** Summer use trail user survey mailed.

* **April, 1994:** Winter use trail user survey mailed. Trails Plan proposal presented at Montana State Trails Conference.

* **June, 1994:** Initial meeting of Montana State Trails Plan Advisory Committee; additional members added for second meeting.

* **August--October, 1994:** Completion of final reports on state trail inventory and trail user surveys.

* **November, 1994:** Scoping document completed and distributed.

* **November, 1994--January, 1995:** Scoping meetings held around the state. Public input compiled, assessed, and added to Plan.

* **January, 1995: January, 1996:** Work proceeds on Plan/PEIS research, writing, and mapping. Advisory Committees continue to meet to discuss Plan/PEIS development. Additional public involvement held as necessary.

* **1996:** Draft Trails Plan/PEIS completed. Public comment period.

* **January, 1997:** Final Plan/PEIS published.

A VISION FOR MONTANA'S TRAIL SYSTEM

Trails Plan Advisory Committee members have assisted with a draft vision statement to help frame the Montana trails planning initiative. The vision is preliminary, and should only be viewed as a starting point to begin thinking about what state-wide trails planning might accomplish in Montana. If you have comments on the vision statement, please add them to the comment form at the end of this document. The draft vision statement is as follows:

Working together, Montanans should strive to maintain and develop a high quality network of designated trails. The vision for Montana's future trail system includes the following points:

* **DIVERSITY OF OPPORTUNITIES:** The trail system should offer opportunities for all ability levels, with facilities for a wide range of user types, including persons with disabilities.

* **VARIETY OF SETTINGS:** The Montana trail system should reflect the spectacular diversity of the state's natural and cultural environments, from urban to wilderness, forest to prairie, mountaintop to river valley, and ghost town to busy city center.

* **MINIMAL CONFLICT:** The trail system should be managed in a way which reduces conflicts among users, as well as between users and non-users. Where there are conflicts, trail users, managers, and other interested parties are encouraged to work together to solve them.

* **INTERPRETATION AND EDUCATION:** The system should allow users to experience and learn more about a wide variety of the state's natural and cultural features. Trails can and should provide a means for interpreting Montana's natural and cultural heritage.

* **NATURAL AND CULTURAL RESOURCE CONSERVATION:** The Montana trail system should be managed in a way which conserves and enhances Montana's natural and cultural resources.

* **ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND TOURISM:** The Montana trail system should enhance the economic vitality of Montana's communities, and be an integral component of the state's tourism industry.

* **ACCESSIBILITY AND LINKAGES:** The Montana trail network should include adequate trail opportunities within a short distance of where most Montanans live. Key linkages between important trail systems, population centers, and other major destinations are vital to the overall usefulness of the Montana trail network. Adding connections between various components of the trail system increases opportunities for trail users.

* **INFORMATION:** Montana trail users (as well as potential users) deserve to have excellent information about trail opportunities in the state. Information about improving safety, reducing conflicts, and minimizing environmental impacts is also important.

* **TRANSPORTATION LINKS:** The Montana trail system should be closely integrated with the primary transportation network in the state and--where appropriate--provide alternatives to vehicular transportation.

* **COOPERATION:** Planning and management of Montana's trail system should be a vehicle for model cooperation between local governments, state agencies, tribal governments, the federal government, private landowners, and trail users and user groups. The Trails Plan is intended to stimulate discussion between all trail users,

helping them to organize more effectively, find common ground, gain a joint sense of purpose, recognize and act upon new opportunities, and collectively work together to improve and maintain Montana's trails.

POSSIBLE TRAIL PLAN/PEIS COMPONENTS

Public input from the scoping period will help shape the content of the Trails Plan and PEIS. At this early point in the process, some of the areas which appear likely to be addressed in the Plan/PEIS include the following:

* **MONTANA TRAIL SUPPLY:** This component looks at the number of trails, their geographic distribution, their attributes, and what uses are permitted on them. In order to help accomplish this, the Institute for Tourism and Recreation Research was contracted to inventory Montana's trails and enter the information in a data base.

* **MONTANA TRAIL DEMAND:** One vehicle for identifying demand was a survey of both summer and winter Montana trail users conducted by the Institute for Tourism and Recreation Research during the fall of 1993 and the spring of 1994. Many of the trail managing agencies likely have data to contribute to this section as well.

* **OVERVIEW OF EXISTING MANAGEMENT PRACTICES, PLANS, POLICIES:** The Plan could provide a summary of existing policies, plans, and management practices used by trail managing agencies. A historical overview of the Montana trail system might also be helpful.

* **TRAIL SYSTEM GAPS AND POTENTIAL FUTURE TRAIL CORRIDORS:** The Plan provides an opportunity to identify potential new trail opportunities and linkages on abandoned rail grades, utility rights-of-ways, and other corridors. Based on the information gathered on trail supply and demand, the Plan could identify areas where demand for particular kinds of trails in specific parts of the state exceeds the supply.

* **KEY ISSUES AFFECTING MONTANA TRAILS AND TRAIL USERS:** Through public input and research, the Plan should identify the most important issues affecting Montana's trails and the people who use them.

* **POTENTIAL IMPACTS AND MITIGATION:** The PEIS, in particular, will examine natural, social, cultural, and economic impacts of state trail grant programs, as well as potential mitigation options.

* **GOALS, OBJECTIVES, AND STRATEGIES FOR ADDRESSING TRAIL ISSUES:** The Plan will identify goals, specific objectives, and strategies for addressing the principal issues and unmet needs identified during the planning process. The Plan

should make recommendations about the future development and management of the Montana trail system.

* **ESTABLISH FUNDING PRIORITIES:** In order to take full advantage of various federal and state funding programs, trail groups and managing agencies must know what the state-wide trail priorities are. Efficient use of public resources necessitates that the most important needs be clearly identified.

POTENTIAL TRAIL PLAN/PEIS ISSUES

The principal aim of the scoping process is to use public input to help identify which trails-related issues are the most important ones to examine in the Trails Plan and PEIS. At this relatively early stage in the planning process, no alternatives or proposals have been developed. Now is the time for the public to help FWP staff and Advisory Committee members define the "scope" of the issues to be examined later in the process.

The following list of issues is included as an example. You may think some of these are important, or you may have others which you feel are more important. Use the list to help stimulate your own thinking about the most important issues affecting trails and trail users:

* Access/Private Property
* User Conflicts/Multiple Use
* Crowding: Trail System Management and Use Distribution
* Barriers to Additional Trail Use
* Resource Impacts and Mitigation
* Impacts on People Who Don't Use Trails
* Coordinating Trails With Transportation Needs
* Funding Issues (e.g., gap between available funding and current demands, new sources of funding, prioritizing projects for funding, etc.)
* Securing Rights-of-Ways for Rails-to-Trails and Other Corridors
* Design and Development
* Maintenance
* Technical Assistance and Information
* Education and Trail Etiquette
* Enforcement
* Liability
* Trails for People with Disabilities
* Signing/Interpretation
* Communication and Cooperation
* Initiating and Maximizing Opportunities
* Trails and Local Land Use Planning
* Long-distance Trail Issues (e.g., completing Montana sections of National Trail System, long-distance biking trails, connections with neighboring states, etc.)

* Politics, Legislation, and Regulations
* Use of Old Road Rights-of-Ways as Trails
* Commercial Use of Public Trails
* Difficulty of Predicting Future Trails Environment During Period of Rapid Change (e.g., uncertainty about future public expectations, funding sources, land use, etc.)
* Trails and Wildlife/Watchable Wildlife Program
* Greenways/Trail Linkages with Rivers and Other Natural Corridors
* Trail System Connectivity

Once you have identified the issues you feel are the most important, you are encouraged to give some thought to potential alternatives for addressing the issues. A comment form is attached at the end of this document.

TRAILS PLAN SCOPING MEETINGS: TIMES AND PLACES

Public scoping meetings will be held around the state in late November and early December. There will be identical afternoon and evening sessions at each location; attend the one you find most convenient. At the start of each meeting, there will be a short presentation about the planning process, and an overview of the Montana trail system and recent research about trail users.

The principal focus of the meeting will be to provide an opportunity for people (trail users and non-users alike) to express their views about what trail-related issues they feel are most important. The point of the meetings is not to debate or argue about trail use, but ensure that a wide range of trail-related issues are brought to the surface in a non-judgmental manner. Once a wide range of issues has been generated, the list will be prioritized by people attending each meeting.

Meeting times and places are as follows:

PLACE: Helena: Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) Commission Room
DATE: Monday, November 21
TIMES: 2:30 P.M and 7:00 P.M.
ADDRESS: 1420 E. 6th Ave.

PLACE: Butte: Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Office
DATE: Tuesday, November 22
TIMES: 2:30 P.M. and 7:00 P.M.
ADDRESS: 106 N. Parkmont

PLACE: Bozeman: FWP Regional Office
DATE: Monday, November 28
TIMES: 2:30 P.M. and 7:00 P.M
ADDRESS: 1400 S. 19th

PLACE: Billings: FWP Regional Office
DATE: Tuesday, November 29
TIMES: 2:30 P.M. and 7:00 P.M.
ADDRESS: 2300 Lake Elmo Dr.

PLACE: Miles City: FWP Regional Office
DATE: Wednesday, November 30
TIMES: 2:30 P.M. and 7:00 P.M.
ADDRESS: P.O. Box 1630 (west Main St.)

PLACE: Glasgow: Cottonwood Inn
DATE: Thursday, December 1
TIMES: 2:30 P.M. and 7:00 P.M.
ADDRESS: Rural Route 1-4210 (on Highway 2)

PLACE: Missoula: FWP Headquarters
DATE: Monday, December 5
TIMES: 2:30 P.M. and 7:00 P.M.
ADDRESS: 3201 Spurgin Rd.

PLACE: Kalispell: Cavanaughs at Kalispell Center
DATE: Tuesday, December 6
TIMES: 2:30 P.M. and 7:00 P.M.
ADDRESS: 20 N. Main

PLACE: Great Falls: FWP Headquarters
DATE: Wednesday, December 7
TIMES: 2:30 P.M. and 7:00 P.M.
ADDRESS: 4600 Giant Springs Road

If you are not able to attend the meeting, you are welcome to mail in your comments. If you have questions, please contact Jeff Erickson (406-444-3818) or Bob Walker (406-444-4585) at FWP's Parks Division.

COMMENT FORM:
MONTANA STATE TRAILS PLAN/PEIS

You may write your comments on this sheet, convey them to FWP staff over the phone (444-3750), or discuss them at the scoping meetings scheduled around the state. (People who plan on attending one of the meetings are also encouraged to fill out a comment form.) Feel free to use additional paper if you need it. To mail the form back, fold twice so the return address on the back is on the outside and tape shut; please add a 29 cent stamp. Comments must be received at the FWP Helena office by Tuesday, December 20.

1) What part of Montana are you from (include nearest town and county)? If you would like to be added to the Trails Plan mailing list, please include your name and full address.

_____

_____

2) What are the key issues affecting trails and people interested in trails in your local area (i.e., city, county, region)? If you can, list them in order of importance, with the most important first.

3) For each issue included above, list any alternative solutions you feel might be appropriate.

4) What are the key issues affecting trails and people interested in trails in Montana as a whole (if different from above)? Again, try to list them in order of importance, with the most important first.

5) For each state-wide issue listed above, list alternative solutions you feel might be appropriate.

6) Are there trail opportunities in your area or elsewhere in Montana which you would like to see developed?

7) Do you have any other comments about Montana trails, trails planning, or trails users?

JEFF ERICKSON
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